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# Is Malawi guilty of spoiling the Queen's language?

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The past and present of a distinctive English in southern Africa

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IN MALAWI, standards of English and of education in general have recently made headlines in the media because of claims that the standards are going down (see, for example: Bwanali, 2002; Chirwa, 2002; Mnelemba, 2002; Mweninguwe, 2002; Phiri 2002a). In 1996, the Malawi government proposed to introduce mother-tongue instruction in primary school grades one to four. This proposal has been resented in some Malawian quarters. The proposed policy was mistakenly understood to be a move that would diminish the presence of English in the curriculum and hence lead to further deterioration in the standard of education. Use of the mother tongue remains unimplemented up to this day, due to a host of practical and political reasons which this commentary will not address (but see Kamwendo 1997, 1999). This article is aimed at highlighting the current condition of the English language in Malawi.

## The status of English in Malawi

Malawi was under British colonial rule from 1891 to the attainment of independence on 6th July 1964, and as a result belongs to the Anglophone group of countries in Africa. As such, English is the principal official language in Malawi. All the three arms of government machinery (that is, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary) use it as the official medium of their transactions. It is a constitutional requirement that members of parliament should demonstrate reasonable fluency in written and spoken English since the language is the sole medium of parliamentary proceedings. Prior to parliamentary elections, candidates therefore have to take an English language proficiency test.

In education, English is the dominant language. It is taught as a subject all the way from grade one at the primary school up to university level, and is the medium of instruction from grade four onwards. No school certificate is awarded in Malawi if a candidate fails to get a pass in English and the entrance examination for university has an English language competence test.

During the presidency of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1964–1994), English received special support and recognition from the President himself. At the attainment of independence, Banda retained English as the official language, in contrast to his northern neighbour, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who embarked on the process of Kiswahilisation, in which the East African lingua franca Kiswahili became the official language. Banda, however, argued against the vernacularisation of the official language, maintaining that English was very important for Malawi's development. We therefore see two different language planning ideologies at work here, Tanzania opting for vernacularisation and Malawi for internationalisation. Banda's strong attachment to the English language can be explained by the fact that he had been out of Malawi for

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over 30 years. He left Malawi at a young age in search of employment to further his education. While working in the mines of South Africa, Banda won the admiration of his superiors and colleagues for his remarkable fluency in English (see Short, 1974).

From South Africa, he proceeded to the United States and later Britain, where he studied medicine. He practised medicine in Britain for many years before going back to Malawi in 1958 to lead the nationalist movement. On 6th July, 1964, Banda became Prime Minister of an independent Malawi, and two years later became President, a post he held in a dictatorial manner till 1994. After a national referendum which went in favour of changing the country's political system from a one-party to a multiparty state, Banda lost in the first post-independence multiparty elections which were held in 1994. He retired from active politics and died in 1997.

Though Banda was a native speaker of Malawi's national language, Chichewa, and was the University of Malawi's honorary professor of Chichewa, he never spoke the language in public. His speeches used to be relayed into local languages by interpreters. He gave several public lectures on Chichewa but none was ever delivered in Chichewa. Instead, all were in English. At his own Kamuzu Academy, the so-called 'Eton of Africa', where the cream of the country's pupils went to study, emphasis was placed on the English, French, Greek, and Latin languages, and Chichewa was never taught. To some people, Banda's linguistic practices were nothing but signs of linguistic imperialism: see the critiques of Banda by Mazrui and Mazrui 1998, and Ngugi 1986. If anything, Banda was a man of contradictions: He was a vehement supporter and native speaker of Chichewa who never spoke his mother tongue, even when talking to villagers who knew no English (cf. Kishindo, 1996). Banda's response to his critics was simple:

You have heard me speak in English at meetings. English, because I want my people, the people of this country, to hear and learn one of the most important languages; for trade, for knowledge; most important.

< <http://www.greatpicbooks.com/epics/may2000.html> >

Banda was very strict with the way one spoke or wrote the English language. To this end, he even used to correct his ministers' English. He

did not spare native speakers of English either, as exemplified in the account given below by Dr Donal Brody, a native speaker of English:

Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda was a brilliant intellectual, a scholar who was fluent in a number of complex and difficult languages. Despite his knowledge, he used and insisted upon simple and concise use of language.... When I produced my short list of ten suggested names for the nation's crafts industry, he laughed and said: "You Americans always want fancy names. This is Malawi Arts and Crafts Centre. Simple and concise."

(<http://www.greatpicbooks.com/banda-tribute.html>)

At mass rallies, he would school his audiences on how to speak and write English well, putting emphasis on the importance of grammar. Banda even called for a national conference to consider the question of standards in the teaching of English in Malawi. Throughout his presidency, Banda was regarded as the national model of good English. The masses saw him as the great teacher of English. However, let us now take a look at the standards of English in the post-Banda era. It has to be said that the post-Banda era has been characterised by a general fall in educational standards as a whole, as evidenced by both low pass rates in national examinations and numerous reports of cheating in examinations and leakage of national examination papers. The standards of English have also gone low.

### English in the post-Banda era

One of the major changes in the post Banda era (from 1994 onwards) has been the linguistic behaviour of Banda's successor, Bakili Muluzi. President Muluzi is a native speaker of Chiyao, and does not possess a high level of education. Normally, Muluzi addresses party rallies in Chichewa, the national language. When he goes into Yao-dominated areas, he speaks Chiyao. In official domains like parliament, Muluzi uses English. Banda was far more fluent in English than Muluzi, and this speaks volumes about the two men's education. The president is no longer the national model of English. In fact, prior to the 1994 general elections, those who did not expect Muluzi to win the presidential elections cited low education and inability to speak good English as two of his weaknesses.

At a time when there is a big appetite for

English in Malawi, any policy that seems to support more use of local languages in the curriculum is bound to be unwelcome. This is what happened in 1996, when the Ministry of Education announced that from then onwards, grades 1 to 4 would be taught through the mother tongues. Despite the fact that the policy announcement had said that English will continue to be offered as a subject right away from grade one, this did not help to drive away the fear that the new policy was anti-English. Opponents of mother-tongue instruction argued that it was unwise for the government to strengthen local languages in the curriculum at a time when standards of the official and international language were going down.

Private schools with an English-only policy are growing in number in Malawi. In these schools, the medium of instruction is English and pupils are required to speak English as part of the school regulation. Whilst some private schools offer Chichewa as a subject, others do not offer it at all. One of the Malawian parents who send their children to English-only international schools is reported as being proud that 'his children speak good English and hopes they will make it to secondary school and finally reach the university' (Mweninguwe, 2002).

Today, it is not uncommon to hear the old generation talk of the colonial days and the Banda era as being the time when Malawi could boast of high standards of English. This view is strongly advanced by Malawi's most celebrated columnist, D. D. Phiri, to whom the University of Malawi awarded an honorary doctorate. Phiri is a staunch advocate of more and better English for Malawi. He has been very critical of the 1996 proposal to introduce mother-tongue education (see Phiri, 2002a,b). Reacting to Matiki's (2001) research findings that some members of parliament are unable to make meaningful contributions during parliamentary debates, due to low proficiency in English, and that allowing such members of parliament to use Chichewa or any other local language would be the solution (Jack Chirwa, 2002), Phiri says:

If the late Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda in his mausoleum learns that we do send to parliament men and women with poor command of English, his soul will stir. I remember that at one occasion he dissolved parliament and ordered that only those who passed English tests or had attained at least a

Junior Certificate would be eligible to contest for election to parliament. (Phiri, 2002a)

The reference to the former president is significant in that it associates Banda with high standards of English, a characteristic lacking in the current Malawi and its leadership.

At the University of Malawi, many external examiners expressed concern over the falling standards in students' expression in English. The English Department at Chancellor College at the University of Malawi was asked to find ways of improving the situation. The department's compulsory first-year course in literature and language did not seem to improve students' level of spoken and written English. It was therefore decided that English for Academic Purposes be taught in a specialist department called Language and Communication Skills.

This new department was created in the early 1990s and now offers language and communication skills to all first-years, but the initial plan to offer the course beyond first year has not been fulfilled, due to shortage of personnel and other problems. The concern over university students' standards of English, however, remains: 'You know most of the university students fail to express themselves in English. They cannot even write good English because of the kind of teachers they have had from primary school' (Mweninguwe, 2002, quoting a parent who opted to send his children to an English-medium international school.)

Recently there was a proposal at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, that Language and Literature departments be separated into one department of Literature and one department of Languages. It was noted that there is duplication of courses offered by the competing departments of English, French, Classics, African Languages and Linguistics, and Language and Communication Skills. The merger of departments was debated and approved at the Faculty of Humanities level. The result was that literature in English was to be taught in the Department of Literature whilst English Language was to go into the Languages Department.

The newly created Department of Language then proceeded to elect its head, but the arrangement was suddenly reversed by the same faculty on the grounds that the merger of departments would mean the demise of English's full departmental status. It was

argued that English, as Malawi's official language, deserved a department of its own. The argument went further to say that it would be suicidal to break up the department of English and drop the name 'English Department' at a time when the nation was crying out for higher standards of English. Though the merger of the departments did not mean a reduction of the courses in the English Department, the plan was dropped out of fear that it would be misunderstood by the public. Such is the sensitive nature of English in Malawi today.

One of the issues that the Muluzi administration has to grapple with is the decline in Malawi's educational standards, including falling standards in English. In a country where English is the linguistic key to socio-economic and political advancement, the decline in standards of English has become a big concern. There have been claims that the government is not doing enough to arrest the decline in the standards of English. For example, recently the Association of the Teaching of English in Malawi (ATEM) blamed the government for not supporting adequately the activities of the association, whose goal is to improve the teaching and learning of the language. Specifically, ATEM cited government's failure to sponsor adequately the association's schools' drama festival. An official of ATEM, Rose Kalizangoma, observed that government is quick to sponsor sports but fails to sponsor the teaching of English. She claimed that unlike sports, English has the potential of directly assisting in checking the country's declining educational standards (cf. Mnelemba, 2002).

## Conclusion

That the standards of English are declining is easy enough to see. What is difficult, however, is how to devise ways of improving the situation. In the meantime, the appetite for more and better English continues to grow. One's quality of English is constantly subjected to assessment, as exemplified by Garry Chirwa's (2002) sarcastic description of Esau Kanyenda, a South African-based Malawian football star, 'who never misplaced a pass but during the interview he kept on misplacing (English) words'.

In parliament, many a time poor English pronunciations or ungrammatical constructions by members of parliament have elicited face-threatening comments and laughter from other MPs. English on the radio has not been spared

as Magola (2001) laments: 'I have noted with dismay that many Malawians who contribute to phone-in programmes on our radio stations are usually unable to express themselves in the Queen's language.'

The current situation in Malawi is such that any proposal to elevate the use of local languages in domains such as education, the media and the legislature is easily mistaken as an anti-English campaign. As long as the government does not take significant steps to check the declining standards in English, the argument that mother tongue instruction in junior primary school is a complement to English rather than its replacement will not receive the support of English-thirsty Malawians. For such Malawians, English is almost equal to education. ■

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